

Smart City Barcelona: The Catalan Quest to Improve Future Urban Living, Antoni Vives (2018)

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As the author (Antoni Vives) of *Smart City Barcelona: The Catalan Quest to Improve Future Urban Living* recognizes, based on his experience as the former deputy mayor of urbanism, housing, infrastructures, environment, energy, ICT and innovation in Barcelona City Council from 2011–2014, ‘losing puts you in your place’ (Vives 2018: 5). In the book, Vives admits to making mistakes after being defeated in Barcelona’s 2015 local elections by the current mayor, Ada Colau, who has since been effectively advised by Francesca Bria, to revert the smart city discourse and practices towards a less technocratic approach, claiming that (smart) citizens should be considered decision-makers rather than mere data providers (Calzada 2018). Aiming to further review the causes of the past mistakes, the book focuses on and attempts to rewrite the implemented past policies from a further democratic standpoint by including precisely aspects such as social justice and rights, collectivism, Catalanism and its identitarian pathway. Those aspects are inevitably intertwined with the unique factors that made Barcelona both a global smart city-in-transition and an experimental city, and thus a reference point for other European and international cities challenging the ongoing surveillance capitalism dystopia (Zuboff 2019). Vives guides readers through twelve chapters eminently targeting smart city practitioners, concluding that Barcelona’s potential ‘as a historic and modern; elitist and popular; conservative and avant-garde; clerical and profoundly secular and transgressive; productive, a tourist destination and a service economy...the indisputable capital of Catalan sentiment, cosmopolitan like so few other world cities’ (Vives 2018: 37) (...) ‘just doesn’t really fit’ into the Spanish socio-political and institutional realm (Vives 2018: 39).

The first three chapters set the scene by admitting to past institutional mistakes, comparing Barcelona with global cities such as Bangalore, Shenzhen and Singapore, among others, and ultimately defining Barcelona as a smart city in a unique fashion intrinsically stemming from the radial urban model coined by Ildefons Cerdà, a Catalan urban planner. The author continuously draws on a mantra used during his institutional experience on the City Council: ‘Barcelona will be a city made up of districts that produce at human speed, that are entirely energy self-sufficient, hyper-connected and produce zero emissions’ (Vives 2018: 32). However, regarding the remarkable strategic framework fixed through the City Protocol Society based on the complex adaptive systems paradigm, and despite the abundant references of initiatives deployed in the city during the institutional period, Vives does not hide any disagreement with the socio-politically radical and lefty positions represented by the current mayor.

In chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, the author then thoroughly describes urban renewal interventions (as in details about Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes) to open the city up for works to prepare it for the work-in-progress ‘City-OS’ (Operating System), ‘defined as the layer of decoupling between sources of data and solutions for intelligent cities’ (Vives 2018: 66), but by contrast, it overlooks a techno-political examination of data ownership in existing multistakeholder policy schemes of the city. The author extensively focuses on the rigorous urban acupuncture strategy – driven by Cerdà’s idea of rebalancing Barcelona as polycentric – by highlighting municipal markets as beacons of community life, their central and strategic locations in the city’s neighbourhoods granting them an incomparable urban-strategic value. Acknowledging the contribution of authors such as John Snow, Jane Jacobs and Jans Ghel in the contemporary understanding the human-scale urban phenomenon, Vives emphasizes the key role of

aggregated data analysis on the use of public space design, yet without further unfolding the extractive big data model occurring in Barcelona.

Ultimately, chapters 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 interestingly elucidate around the successful and atypical nature of conventional urban projects such as superblocks; the density of private, civic, and public activity; micro-urbanisation interventions; the new urban economies; and the related transformation of jobs and productive activity in the city.

In conclusion, this book contributes to knowledge and scholarship in the policy examination of the case study of Barcelona during 2011–2014. Thus, this is a valuable urban policy analysis in Barcelona. The analysis sheds light on managerial practices of the aforementioned period and, for that reason, raises many questions – some of which are currently being answered. The author eminently takes an autobiographical position, which sometimes seems to justify several policy decisions. Having said that, the author demonstrates deep knowledge and experience in the field and a comprehensive understanding of the urban metabolic dynamics. Finally, the book is a valuable document to compare the decisions and approaches implemented at that time (Bakici et al. 2013) with the current ongoing smart city policy implementations (Calzada 2017). Undoubtedly, the author's self-critical standpoint shows how much strategic and techno-political light Barcelona is shedding in challenging ideological and strategic political positions in the contemporary smart city (Islar and Irgil, 2018). Practitioners and critical academics will find this book a good source for practical examples and a retrospective analysis of Barcelona's turn towards a more avant-garde policy agenda driven by data, techno-politics, and citizenship (Calzada and Almirall 2019).

Reviewed by Dr Igor Calzada, University of Oxford, igor.calzada@compas.ox.ac.uk & ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4269-830X>

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